**Première publication dans *Speaking to Each Other*, vol. II: "About Literature", London, Chatto & Windus, 1970, pp. 260-274. Le texte a d'abord été distribué sous forme de brochure suite à une communication donnée en 1967 lors du colloque annuel de la section de Sociologie de la Britisch Association.**

We say that a good writer has imagination, intuition, insight. We expect to see these qualities in his work; perhaps – to come straight to the theme of this essay – in his eye for 'significant detail' about society (that some gestures or habits seem to tell more about a society than other gestures or habits); or in the way he discerns deep secular trends within his society – that it is moving in this general direction rather than that, or is expressing unconsciously some ambiguity in its own sense of itself.

But this is a claim about much more than literature and a bigger claim than literary critics always realize. It points to truths outside literature and cannot be contained in what are called 'purely literary values'. It points outside the literature to the life that literature examines, and claims to say something true about that life. It claims that the literary imagination can give insights into the nature of society itself, insights which cannot be contained within a self-enclosed aesthetic world; insights which, it is often assumed, can affect a reader's own sensibility thereafter. Or, it seems to follow, insights which may express themselves not only in a writer's formal works of literature but may be brought to bear by him as direct commentary on his society – as in the debate about culture and society which runs through the nineteenth century and to which many literary critics contributed.

Yet the claim is still larger, even when it is made solely about formal works of literature. It is a claim that these works are at their best much more than reflectors or mirrors of their society, more than symptomatic evidence. I am doubtful whether, since literature is produced by individual human beings, any work of literature can be explained wholly as a symptom. But certainly some are more 'symptomatic' than others, than what – to beg a big question for the moment – we call important works of literature. The run-of-the-mill romantic novel in the eighteenth century, or the popular novel of sex and violence today, will probably yield more if they are regarded as mirrors of movements within their society rather than as 'disinterested explorations' of

aspects of that society. But if we regard even such works from outside simply as mirrors, to be easily understood, we may miss the most important elements through which they do reflect their society; moreover, it is much more difficult to read them properly even for what they 'reflect', and may require closer critical attention than literary critics or social scientists have commonly thought.

But, as I say, we usually make larger claims than that. We claim that somehow the literary imagination can, by exploring a society in its own way, tell us something new about aspects of that society, provide illuminating hypotheses about it, suggest orders within it that are exceptionally revealing. We claim that it can in itself and by its insights (not by being used as 'symptomatic evidence') assist the understanding of society.

What does this enormous claim mean? Does it mean more than that we seek to attribute to a writer's personal impressions the status of objective truth? If more, how are these insights arrived at? Is the process in any way related to procedures in the social sciences? Can these insights be 'checked'? How far and in what sense can they be said to be 'true'? I can't indisputably answer these questions. But I will lay out some of the considerations which seem relevant to beginning an answer.

I need to turn from literature for a while and look at the way in which one kind of social scientist works. He has, say, a mass of material about whatever field he is investigating, a great mass of material. How does he make any sense out of it, find any patterns? Because he has an initial frame; he starts with a hypothesis, or with several. But there are an endless number of possible hypotheses with which to 'make sense' of the material. Of course, some are ruled out by what he might call his general 'feeling for the material itself' (though that phrase also begs a lot of questions); perhaps some never occur to him – he just happens not to think of them. All of them he tests against the material, to see how well they stand up. From his sense of recurrent stresses, recurrent shapes, recurrent omissions, he moves towards testing and modifying his hypotheses. Perhaps some people would say that this way of putting it gives too much weight to the initial hypothesis-making; that if we have a sufficiently full body of material, of facts, and if we feed it through a suitably complex computer, that computer will itself find within the material, objectively, the recurrent stresses, shapes, omissions and so on. But that only puts the question one stage further back. What is a full picture? And what is a fact? We might say that there are some objective facts and some that are 'objective'. An objective fact would be of this kind: the library

issued ten million hardbound books in the last year. So long as careful definitions are made at the start, this is testable and enforceable. It is therefore, if one wishes to use that term, scientific; it can become part of the social scientist's objective data. I am using this description because one social scientist has suggested to me that his aim must be to make his 'facts' so far as possible into 'data' of this kind; and naturally I see what he means. He agreed that he soon leaves that level and arrives at questions like these: why were that number of books taken out? or those proportions of different kinds of books? how were they read? what needs did they seem to fulfil?... and so on. Answers to questions of this kind can produce much the most important knowledge he seeks. They are more likely to do so if the social scientist does his best so to refine his methods that as many facts as possible become data in the sense described above. But the most important of them can never finally become objective data in that sense; at their best – a very good best – they become 'objective'. How many facts, then, would we need so as to arrive at 'the truth' about the library services in Birmingham? If we had, say, 200 thousand or 2 million or 20 million facts we would (a) only scratch the surface of possible facts and (b) more important, we would angle things. Each different angle from which we look at any given object will throw up a range of new facts and new relationships. Every enquiry contains within itself, must contain, a range of assumptions and concepts before it can begin to recognize 'facts' to collect. One can easily imagine all sorts of bad, that is to say patently and narrowly subjective, analyses of 'class' in English life. There can be no objective analysis of it, even by someone who is not English or even by a non-European. We can and should push more and more towards objectivity, but we can never reach it. I am not saying all this so as to criticize the social sciences, and don't suppose I have given that impression; after all, this particular debate is a long and live one within the social sciences themselves. Here is just one quotation, taking much the view I take. From Myrdal:

"The chaos of possible data for research does not organize itself into systematic knowledge by mere observation. Hypotheses are necessary. We must raise questions before we can expect answers from the facts, and the questions must be 'significant'. The questions, furthermore, have to be complicated before they reach down to the facts. Even apparently simple concepts presume elaborate theories. These theories – or systems of hypotheses – contain, of necessity, no matter how scrupulously the statements of them are presented, elements of *a priori* speculation."[1]

I am pointing to an inescapable fact of our lives. I say 'ours' since it is, phrased rather differently, a fact of the writer's life also. We none of us 'know' anything in the blue;

we know things within the conceptual and imaginative frames available to us.

How does a creative writer's way of arriving at 'truths' compare with that of social scientists of the kind I have described? I spoke of a social scientist sitting, so to speak, before a great mass of material and making raids into it with his hypotheses so as to see what sense they make of it (though the actual process is more subtly concurrent than that makes it sound). Some of the less sophisticated objections to literature as evidence about society take the form of saying that it really produces no evidence, that whatever the writer happens to bring forward and work his rhetoric on is called evidence. I think this is a misguided view and that, the position of the writer may at this point be close to that of some social scientists. I suspect that what literary critics usually call a 'social insight' – the sense that such and such a gesture is 'significant' – is the result of the writer holding in his imagination an enormous amount of material, of 'facts' about society. I believe he holds this material in a kind of suspension, and that it is at the moment of his finding a unifying image – a single gesture or a large theme – that, we say he has had a 'significant' insight. Here is Conrad on a moment of 'inspiration':

"There must have been, however, some sort of atmosphere in the whole incident because all of a sudden I felt myself stimulated. And then ensued in my mind what a student of chemistry would best understand from the analogy of the addition of the tiniest little drop of the right kind, precipitating the process of crystallization in a test tube containing some colourless solution."[2]

I believe this material in bulk, if we were able to count it, would be as voluminous as that deployed in the most elaborate social scientific project we can imagine. I think that with a great writer the weight of material being drawn upon in the background would be (if we could lay it out discursively) of a complexity that would daunt even the most energetic team of social scientists, with the largest foundation grant we have ever known, working for years and years. How else can one begin to explain the range of material about society or about the individual brought to bear in Shakespeare's plays? I am talking at the moment about sheer material, not about the way it is ordered. I am pointing to the fantastic complexity of the observation itself, a complexity which Shakespeare himself did not and could not realize. At the moments when a gifted writer is working at great heat the capacities brought to bear are beyond the conscious control of any man, and yet are all co-ordinated. If one could write out a description of all the abilities being used instantaneously by a superb tennis player in

action, and then multiplied it several times, one might just begin to have an idea of the complexity of the material being held in suspension by a great writer at the time of writing. One has to think not only of the mass of individual details and skills but of the capacity also to find within them an overall structure or movement. To do this is to act almost incredibly quickly and co-ordinatedly.

So I am suggesting that a writer may have at least as many 'facts' to work on as a social scientist. And that he orders them so as to make 'significant explorations' not by conscious, controlled aggregation but by imaginative power. His imaginative power is the social scientist's capacity to frame hypotheses; or the other way round, the social scientist's capacity to find hypotheses is decided by his imaginative power. Is there, in fact, a difference in kind between the literary imagination at work on a society and the social scientific mind 'making sense of' its material? Are not the imaginations of the two at their best close to each other? I have to say 'at their best' because it seems obvious that not all of us are as quick at ordering, at finding 'significant detail', as others.

Instead of 'significant detail' there I almost wrote 'ideal type'. In some ways it would be attractive to be able to claim that the artist's 'significant detail' is the social scientist's 'ideal type'; and they are probably related. But more importantly they differ; and their differences go to the heart of the differences between the two disciplines. Ideal type analysis abstracts from the detail of society so as to make a usable theoretic design; creative writing recognizes 'significant detail' whilst at the same time recognizing and recreating the flux of untypical life. Part of the experience of literature is this sense of pattern-and-lack-of-pattern at one and the same time.

But to come back: not all of us are equally good at finding order and 'significant detail'. Some people are so quick that they seem able to find illuminating instances from the tiniest amount of material, as though by a sudden 'gift'. I think it was Aristotle who said that the greatest gift of the writer was the power to make metaphors – and in my sense every metaphor is a significant hypothesis or making of relationships –  and perhaps one either has that power or not. It is easy to find similar prescriptions for social scientists. Talking about the relation between material and hypothesis Adorno says: "I would put the greatest emphasis on audacity and originality in proposing a solution."[5] There is a sense of intellectual discipline behind those two statements from which literary critics could learn.

But still I think it is wrong to talk as though 'a sudden gift' or insight can greatly explore society in itself, without reference to what it has to feed on. We all know of very young writers who can produce memorable work. But they are more likely to produce marvellous lyrics about individual experience or illuminating, successive, single insights into aspects of society than a sustained exploration into and ordering of a society's life. It is sometimes said that mathematicians can be at their best in their teens; I don't see how a writer can be at his best at that age in his insight into society. He simply has not experience enough, even unconsciously. He cannot get far without some material to work on; he has to have the material. It is true that Henry James was dry on this point:

"I remember an English novelist, a woman of genius, telling me that she was much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth. She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a *pasteur*, some of the young Protestants were seated at a table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. She had got her direct personal impression, and she turned out her type. She knew what youth was, and what Protestantism; she also had the advantage of having seen what it was to be French, so that she converted these ideas into a concrete image and produced a reality. Above all, however, she was blessed with the faculty which when you give it an inch takes an ell, and which for the artist is a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or of place in the social scale. The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it – this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education."[6]

But that was partly Henry James's way of putting in their place the grosser forms of naturalism. His woman novelist and James himself were no doubt more 'gifted' than most of us; still, they could only know how to 'read' such a snapshot of a scene, could only recognize it as what James called a 'germ', because they had had years of slowly observing, not necessarily while knowing they were observing, other places and other times, perhaps other societies. Later in that passage from which I have just quoted

James added: "I am far from intending by this to minimize the importance of exactness – of truth of detail"; and the same passage produced that famous injunction to novice writers: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" – which in its turn reminds one of the importance Lévi-Strauss gives to 'participation'. Sustained imaginative perception of any depth into a society only looks like a sudden gift; it takes off from saturation in experience.

So our insights have been selected and ordered. But this finding and ordering of insights is a process of evaluation of evidence, according to the penetration they seem to give into the life of a society. It implies that these insights and this order have more 'real' or long-term significance than others. But suppose someone else, who presumably would claim to have observed society, consciously or not, as much and as well as those who are called good imaginative writers or good social scientists, claims that his picture is at least as 'real' and 'true' as theirs? His picture might be quite different and, in our view, plainly wrong. We cannot simply accuse him of lack of evidence. Such people usually love their evidence and have masses of it. One often hears public speakers make large assertions about the extent of the corruption in British society today, based on a great deal of 'evidence' and observation. Why is their observation or that of a 'bad' novelist less significant, less meaningful, than that of a 'good' novelist or, for that matter, of a social scientist gifted with Adorno's 'originality'? So we have reached now a broader question than we have looked at so far. Not only: "What is an insight into society and how is it arrived at?", but how do we judge between the value of different insights, between different people's insights? Why should we not accept the extreme evangelist's or the 'bad' novelist's or the unoriginal social scientist's selection and ordering? I'm not sure that in the last resort we can give a final answer to this question. But we can go some way before we reach the last resort. At least, I will suggest some criteria which help me to begin to choose different insights and different interpretations. Though if you tell me that they are all at bottom circular or self-validating, because of the questions begged in the use of such words as 'adequate', 'relevant', 'conformity' and 'compatibility', I might have to agree.

First of the rough criteria, then: a range and a command of complexity in the writer adequate to this complex and wide-ranging subject, the study of men in society. A range and sense of complexity are not the same as a love of mass and complication. Second, a kind of economy or, in the mathematician's sense, elegance – a relevance or conformity between the treatment itself and the particular areas under examination, a lack of hysteria (which can often be recognized, in the writing itself, by the obsessive

recurrence of certain themes or images), a lack of excess. Finally, a reasonable compatibility with findings from other disciplines; a compatibility with 'truth' found, with as much range, complexity and elegance, by different routes; the sense that each illuminates as well as mutually qualifies the others.

Rules such as these might be a rough way of separating sheep from goats. But they don't get us much of the way. What about fantastic art, surrealist art, art which is deliberately distorted, excessive, obsessional, which appears to turn 'reality' on its head or narrows its interest to one tiny and aberrant aspect of society? What about, say, William Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch*? Can that lead us to some 'truth' about contemporary American society (again, other than being in itself symptomatic of certain strains in that society)? Certainly, it has complexity and so passes my first test. Yet it is also excessive and distorted. But such penetration as it has, such illumination as it offers, probably comes from its submission to and belief in the need for excess and distortion in the face of the experience it is exploring. Yet I do not think this particular problem is one of the most difficult. These kinds of work can also be put to my third test. If we read them properly (that is, obliquely) we can check how far they sit with the findings of other disciplines. One might find a useful interaction between theories of alienation and anomie and much that is recreated, dramatized, explored in Kafka, William Burroughs and others. The point is that such evidence does not necessarily breach the major principle but helps define it better; we shall only see what art of this kind is 'saying' about society if we learn to read it 'as art'.

If we do not first 'submit' to it in this way we may go astray. A social psychologist may use works of art as symptomatic evidence and find in them, say, what seems like corroboration of his views about anomie. He may raid them with a preconceived set of theories.[7] But if he first 'submits' to them they may not simply reinforce but modify and qualify his understanding of anomie. At this stage the interaction has become fruitful; each side is helping the other in its own best way.

Literary evidence does not simply illustrate that 'X' is what a society believes, assumes, feels. It recreates what it *seems like* to be a human being or a society which believes, assumes or feels 'X'. So it helps itself to define 'X'. If it is true, as a social scientist has said, that sociology always risks missing what it is trying to discover because of its 'love of clarity and exactness' then we can say that literature may help to keep open our sense of the richness of human experience, the virtually inexhaustible meanings in each gesture and word spoken, if they are understood in

their contexts. But even that way of putting it emphasizes too much the particular local detail. One needs a way of describing (and I haven't found one) the *whole* experience which we undergo in reading a great work of literature. With that, we might be nearer understanding how much and in what ways such a work may alter our sense of man in society, may inform our sense of human life.

All this underlines the importance to social science of learning to read art expressively as well as instrumentally; and of doing this with the arts at all levels, mass art as much as 'high art'. Literature is 'evidence', then, but evidence which has to be read in quite a subtle sense, evidence through fictions, or through myths and rituals which can body out tensions and confrontations well below the overt level. This is why content analysis is particularly interesting, as a frontier area between the two disciplines. One can learn a good deal about how to 'read' a text from the best social-scientific content-analysis. For its part, literary critical method can help towards a fuller reading of the expressive meanings within works. It can thus help to inform the social scientist's initial hypotheses when he gets to work, in his own way, on aspects of modern society; and it may help to show that many expressive phenomena are not only symptomatic of the consciousness of their age but themselves help to alter that consciousness.

I don't underestimate the effort and intelligence that go into the search for objectivity in social scientific work; nor do I undervalue the results. Still, I do not think that any of us, whether literary critics or social scientists, can claim that we are showing 'the truth'. The most we can say is that we have shown 'something true about' a society, when seen from this angle or that. This changed phrasing is more than a play on words. I cannot imagine an accurate use of the phrase 'the truth about so-and-so […]'. There are, of course, many levels of error and misleading subjectivity which can be cut through and must be cut through in search of 'something true about' any aspect of a society. Much current talk about teenage behaviour or about changes in class consciousness shows that well enough. But at a more intellectually-trained level the difficulty remains. Suppose six contemporary historians sat down together to produce: "a brief objective account of what Mr. Chamberlain's visit to Munich in 1938 meant politically." There would be agreement on only a few small items. How could there be more? Such a question brings into play the most delicate and deep-rooted patterns of assumptions and judgments. We can drive hard to get clear of them, and sometimes for limited practical purposes we may just manage to do so. But at the end of this line we reach bedrock; all findings, whether in literature or the social sciences, must be based on a set of agreed hypotheses, all rest finally on assent rather than proof, on a

common conceptual frame with which we begin to make sense of the world. What we call proof or 'truth' indicates our hope that we have pushed past all possible recognizable subjectivities; to go further really would be to lift ourselves up by our own mental bootstraps.

It is not unnecessary or tautologous to say this; the issue is important and neither simple nor closed. We may have to act 'as if' we can drive right through to 'objective truth', so as to get down to the conceptual bedrock at all. But if we think we can easily ignore or break through that bedrock we will have deluded ourselves at the crucial stage of our work; and we will then, ironically, not even reach true bedrock.

This is where I become particularly interested in the developing study of linguistics. I am thinking now not of the degree to which our modes of thinking, the casts of our minds, are decided by the history of our race and society; but of the way in which the language we use can respond to changes in sensibility. I do not mean, bluntly, that language is culturally conditioned; and in any case I think art not only draws on the language made available by its culture but probably feeds back into the culture new forms of language and so of experience. I mean that the same words seem to change with changing sensibilities. True emotional north must always look like true emotional north or we should feel too threatened. We must always be able to speak of 'love', 'tenderness', 'charity', 'cruelty', 'folly', 'right or wrong', even though the emotional and imaginative realities meant by all these words may have changed enormously over the decades. Of all social changes the most difficult to trace are those which take place within the sensibilities or consciousnesses of societies, in their emotional registers, over time. In a famous *New Yorker* cartoon a married couple are sitting in a suburban drawing-room watching television. One of them turns to the other and remarks cheerfully that critics of TV who say it is turning us all into morons must be mad. You look closer – and see that both the man and his wife have the heads of apes. Who ever admitted to being 'alienated', one feels like asking? Part of the answer is that under the impact of art we sometimes do. We can recognize what 'alienation' may mean on the pulses and may even see something of it in ourselves then.

My reference to a common bedrock was not meant to be dispiriting but quite the contrary. That there should be some common frame is, to begin with, inevitable and useful; or we could neither talk to each other nor make sense of our material. If the material were just there, outside, and if we were without even the beginnings of a possible frame of reference, that material would be totally inexhaustible, amorphous

and bewildering. But then, having admitted that our consciousnesses suggest certain frames and not others, we are involved in a sort of battle with those consciousnesses, a battle we will in the end always lose but in which we can make gains. And this seems to me as true of the social sciences as of literature, even though their modes of procedure are so different. Literary artists are not objective, admitted; social scientists can only be 'objective' within inverted commas. But literature, we say, best illuminates its age when it 'stands outside it […] sees beyond it'. And I think one can say much the same of the best social science, that in which 'originality', to use one of the words I borrowed earlier, is most in play.

So I do not see that a creative writer is inherently more likely to lead us astray in our understanding of society than a social scientist. The rules of his kind of work may not be as plain as those of the social scientist but they are at least as numerous and probably more tricky. So long as we learn to read and listen to him – read his fictions, understand their obliquity and so on – we may learn a good deal from them. Not that those of us who are literary critics always do this well. The world of literary criticism, like all professional worlds, has its own deceptions and self-justifications. We jump to too many cultural conclusions, taking off quickly from the works to large evaluative generalizations with very few historical or sociological checks and balances. Our cultural ideas are too comfortable, limited and enclosed. This is a pity when we are making cultural generalizations about works of literature. It is at least as great a pity when literary critics move out to observe and comment on society directly. I think they should do so, as their nineteenth-century predecessors did. But they usually move too easily into undisciplined impressionism. As Alan Shuttleworth says: "There is a way of writing here, biographical, particular, actual, vivid, responsive, on a human scale, which is aware of its limitations."[8] He is at that point regretting that the conservatism of the literary tradition has led to either a suspicion of cultural judgments or, where they are employed, has encouraged a generalized impressionism unaware of its own limitations.

The equivalent error in social science is that attitude which claims to be 'value-free' (and I have defined the sense in which I think this is a proper ideal), but is really a hardnosed unimaginativeness. And this is finally as damaging to social science as it would be to literary criticism; we are acting most intelligently when we face valuations, not when we evade them.

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